

3. Four Imams of Sunni.

Imām Abū Ḥanīfa (الإمام أبو حنيفة النعمان بن ثابت) (699–767 AD).

Introduction:

Imām Abū Ḥanīfa (الإمام أبو حنيفة) was the founder of the Ḥanafī sect (maslak) of Islamic, the oldest of the four major sect (maslak) Sunni (hanafi, maliki, shafi, hanbali). He is remembered for his sharp reasoning, independence, and strong influence on Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

Full name, parent name:

His full name was Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu‘mān ibn Thābit (الإمام أبو حنيفة النعمان بن ثابت). His father was Thābit (ثابت), a merchant of Persian origin.

Early life & background:

He was born in 699 AD in Kufa (Iraq) during the Umayyad Caliphate. From a young age, he showed great intelligence and interest in religion and trade.

In which caliphate:

He lived under the Umayyad and early Abbasid Caliphates.

His teacher; education & influences:

He was a Tabi’een; He met Anas ibn Malik (r.a) the sahabi. He studied under many Tabi’eens, including Ḥammad ibn Abī Sulaymān. He was also influenced by scholars of hadith and reasoning.

Here are his main teachers:

1. **Hammad ibn Abi Sulayman:** His main teacher and fiqh mentor (jurisprudence teacher). Abu Hanifa studied under him for 18 years in Kufa. Hammad was the student of Ibrahim al-Nakha’i, who was the student of ‘Alqamah, who learned from Abdullah ibn Mas’ud (r.a) — one of the greatest jurists among the Sahabah. This means Abu Hanifa’s *chain of fiqh (Islamic law)* goes directly back to **Abdullah ibn Mas’ud (r.a)**.

2. **Ata ibn Abi Rabah:** A great scholar of Makkah, student of Ibn Abbas (r.a). Abu Hanifa spent time learning from him during Hajj seasons. Ata was known for his deep understanding of Qur’an and Tafsir.

3. **Ikrimah:** The freed slave and student of Ibn Abbas (r.a). Known for his strong knowledge of Tafsir (Qur’an explanation). Abu Hanifa met and benefited from him in Makkah.

4. **Nafi:** The freed slave of Abdullah ibn Umar (r.a). He was one of the main transmitters of Hadith. Abu Hanifa learned narrations and rulings from him.

5. **Qatada ibn Di’ama:** A scholar of Basra and student of Anas ibn Malik (r.a). Expert in Tafsir and Hadith. Abu Hanifa learned Qur’anic interpretation from him.

6. **Al-Sha'bi (Aamir ibn Shurahbil):** One of the great scholars of Kufa, a *Tabi'i* who learned from many companions. Abu Hanifa learned about legal reasoning (*Qiyas*) and Islamic ethics from him.

Career & historical context:

He became a leading jurist in Kufa and later in Baghdad. He refused political positions from the Abbasid rulers and was even imprisoned for his independence. He believed that rulers often pressured judges to give rulings that suited politics, not according to Islam just because the Abbasi caliphate want to make him a judge (*Qazi*) due to his talent, knowledge of Islam.

Major work/books:

His ideas are preserved in works compiled by his students, such as '*Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* and *Kitāb al-Āthār*.

Contribution in modern science:

His method of using logic and reasoning influenced later legal thinking and even approaches to rational inquiry.

Technic & thoughts:

He emphasized *qiyās* (analogy), reasoning, and opinion (*rai*) (*mashwara*) in law. His system allowed flexibility in changing circumstances means Imam Abu Hanifa used *qiyās* (reasoning by analogy) and *rai* (*mashwara*) (personal judgment based on knowledge) when making Islamic laws. If the Quran and Hadith clearly gave a ruling, he followed it. If there was no direct answer, he used logic and reasoning to find a solution. He compared new situations with older ones (this is called *qiyās*) to make fair rulings.

Death & legacy:

He died in 767 AD in Baghdad during (Abbasi khilaafat), reportedly poisoned in prison. His sect (*maslak*) spread widely across the Muslim world, especially in South Asia, Turkey, and Central Asia.

Critical/critics perspectives:

Some critics accused him of relying too much on reasoning instead of hadith. Yet, many praised him for balancing logic with faith.

Conclusion:

Imam Abu Hanifa's greatest contribution was the establishment of the Hanafi sect (*maslak*), one of the four major Sunni sect (*maslak*). His method combined the Qur'an, Hadith, consensus of scholars, and reasoning through analogy (*qiyās*) and personal judgment (*rai*) (*mashwara*). He also introduced the principle of *istihsān* (juristic preference), which allowed choosing what was fair and beneficial when strict rules caused hardship. This made his system practical, flexible, and suitable for changing times and situations. Imam Abu Hanifa also trained many great students, like Imam Abu Yusuf and Imam Muhammad al-Shaybani, who spread and preserved his teachings in written works. His *fiqh* not only covered worship and rituals but also trade, contracts, family matters, and governance, making it useful for everyday life. Today, millions of Muslims across the world—including in South Asia,

Turkey, Central Asia, and the Balkans—still follow Hanafi fiqh, showing how deeply his work continues to guide Islamic practice.

Imām Mālik ibn Anas (الإمام مَالِكُ بْنُ أَنَسٍ) (711–795 AD).

Introduction:

Imām Mālik started the Mālikī sect (maslak) (school of law). He lived in Medina, the city of the Prophet ﷺ, and believed that the way people in Medina practiced Islam was very close to how the Prophet ﷺ and his companions had practiced it. Because of this, he taught that their customs and daily practices should be taken as an important source for Islamic law, along with the Qur'an and ḥadīth. This gave his sect (maslak) a strong connection to the early traditions of Islam, and it became one of the main sect (maslak) followed in North Africa, Andalusia (Spain), and parts of Arabia.

Full name, parent name:

His full name was Mālik ibn Anas ibn Mālik ibn Abī Āmir. He was born in Medina into a respected Arab family. His father's name was Anas ibn Mālik (not the famous sahaabi of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Anas ibn Mālik r.a, but another person with the same name).

Early life & background:

He was born in 711 AD during the late Umayyad Caliphate. He grew up surrounded by scholars in Medina.

In which caliphate:

He lived through the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.

His teacher; education & influences:

He studied with famous scholars like Imām Jafar al-Šādiq, Ibn Hurmuz, and al-Zuhrī.

Career & historical context:

He became the leading scholar of Medina and was respected by caliphs, though he sometimes resisted their pressure.

Major work/books:

Al-Muwaṭṭa is the most famous book of Imām Mālik ibn Anas. The title means “The Well-Trodden Path” or “The Approved Path.” It is considered one of the earliest written collections of ḥadīth (sayings of the Prophet ﷺ) and fiqh (Islamic law rulings). Imām Mālik worked on it for more than 40 years, carefully selecting reports and legal opinions. What makes Al-Muwaṭṭa unique is that Imām Mālik used not only ḥadīth but also the practice of the people of Medina as a source of law. He believed their living tradition reflected the Prophet's teachings very closely. Even great scholars like Imām al-Shāfi'ī praised it highly, calling it one of the most authentic works.

The book contains about 1,700 narrations, including: Sayings of the Prophet ﷺ (ḥadīth). Sayings of the companions (ṣaḥāba). Opinions of later scholars of Medina & Imām Malik's own legal judgments and reasoning.

Contribution in modern science:

His focus on community practice as a legal source influenced modern studies on law and culture.

Technic & thoughts:

He stressed following hadith and the practice of Medina. He preferred caution and stability in legal decisions.

Death & legacy:

He died in Medina in 795 AD. His sect (maslak) spread in North Africa, Andalusia (Spain), and parts of Arabia.

Critical/critics perspectives:

Critics said he relied too much on Medina's practice, but his method preserved authenticity.

Conclusion:

Some people thought Imām Mālik depended too much on the customs of Medina, which they felt were too local and not for everyone. But many others respected him because his method was authentic and closely connected to the Prophet ﷺ and his companions. Means some criticized him for being too local, but many praised him for being genuine and true to the Prophet's tradition.

Imām al-Shāfi'ī (767–820 AD).

Introduction:

Imām al-Shāfi'ī founded the Shāfi'ī sect (maslak). He is known for creating a systematic approach to Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

Full name, parent name:

His full name was Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī. His father's name was Idrīs ibn al-Abbās. His mother's name was Fāṭimah bint Abdullāh.

Early life & background:

His father died when he was very young, so he was raised mainly by his mother, who took him to Mecca for his education. He was born in 767 AD in Gaza (Palestine), the same year Imām Abū Ḥanīfa died. He grew up poor but memorized the Qur'an at a young age.

In which caliphate:

He lived under the Abbasid Caliphate.

His teacher; education & influences:

He studied under students of Imām Mālik in Medina and was influenced by both Mālikī and Ḥanafī traditions.

Career & historical context:

He worked in Baghdad and Egypt, refining Islamic legal theory. He traveled widely and debated with scholars.

Major work/books:

1. **Al-Risālah (The Treatise).** This is the first book ever written on the principles of Islamic law (fiqh). In it, Imām al-Shāfi explained how Islamic law should be made and what sources to use. He set a clear order of authority: Quran, Hadith of the Prophet ﷺ, Consensus (ijmā‘) of the Muslim community. Analogy (qiyās) when there is no direct text. *Al-Risālah* made Islamic law more organized, systematic, and logical.

2. **Al-Umm (The Mother Book).** This is a large collection of Imām al-Shāfi’s legal rulings and opinions. It covers many topics: Salah (prayer), fasting, zakāt, ḥajj, family laws, trade, criminal laws, and more. It is practical and shows how his legal principles from *Al-Risālah* work in real situations. It became the main reference for the Shāfi sect (maslak) and is still studied today.

Contribution in modern science:

He developed principles of systematic reasoning and evidence, which shaped later scientific and legal methods.

Technic & thoughts:

He stressed combining Quran, hadith, consensus (ijmā‘), and analogy (qiyās) as legal sources.

Death & legacy:

He died in 820 AD in Egypt. His sect (maslak) spread in East Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of the Middle East.

Critical/critics perspectives:

Some considered him too strict in rejecting local customs, but others admired his clarity and method.

Conclusion:

Imām al-Shāfi brought structure to Islamic law (fiqh), earning respect across Sunni traditions.

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780–855 AD).

Introduction:

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was the founder of the Ḥanbalī sect (maslak). He is remembered for his strong defense of hadith and refusal to compromise under political pressure. The correct name is Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (with “Ḥanbal”). “Ibn Ḥanbal” means “son of Ḥanbal” (his grandfather’s name). Some people mistakenly say “Ibn Hambal. His follows are called as hanbali, by mistake pronounced as Hambali also.

Full name, parent name:

His full name was Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal al-Shaybānī. His father’s name was Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal.

Early life & background:

He was born in 780 AD in Baghdad, during the Abbasid Caliphate. He grew up an orphan and dedicated his life to studying hadith.

In which caliphate:

He lived during the Abbasid Caliphate.

His teacher; education & influences:

He studied under scholars in Baghdad and traveled widely to collect hadith. He was influenced by Imām al-Shāfi‘.

Career & historical context:

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal became famous during the Mihna (inquisition), which was a time when the Abbāsīd rulers forced scholars to say that the Quran was created. Most scholars gave in because they were afraid of punishment, but Imām Aḥmad refused to change his belief. He said the Quran is the eternal word of Allah, not created. Because of this, he was arrested, beaten, and imprisoned, but he never gave up his belief. His courage made him a hero in the eyes of ordinary Muslims.

Major work/books:

His great work is ‘Musnad Aḥmad book. Musnad Aḥmad is the most famous book of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. It is a large collection of hadith (sayings of the Prophet ﷺ). The book contains about 30,000+ hadiths. Imām Aḥmad arranged them by the names of the companions who narrated them, not by subject. For example, all the hadiths narrated by Abū Bakr (r.a) are grouped together, then those by ‘Umar (r.a), and so on. He included hadith of different levels (strong and weak), but his goal was to collect as much as possible from the Prophet ﷺ. It is one of the largest hadith collections in Islam. It preserves many narrations not found in other books. Later scholars (like al-Bukhārī and Muslim) also used it as a source. It shows his lifelong dedication to preserving the Prophet’s words.

Contribution in modern science:

His careful hadith collection influenced the science of verifying sources and reliability.

Technic & thoughts:

He stressed strict reliance on Quran and hadith, rejecting excessive reasoning.

Death & legacy:

He died in 855 AD in Baghdad. His funeral was attended by huge crowds. His sect (maslak) spread mainly in Arabia and later influenced Islamic reform movements.

Critical/critics perspectives:

Some criticized him for being too literalist, but many praised his honesty and courage.

Conclusion:

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s steadfastness and devotion to hadith left a lasting impact on Islamic faith and law.

Comparison of the Four Imams:

Aspect	Imam Abu Hanifa	Imam Malik	Imam al-Shafi'i	Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal
Lifetime	699–767 AD	711–795 AD	767–820 AD	780–855 AD
Major Work	Al-Fiqh al-Akbar, Al-Fiqh al-Absat	Al-Muwatta	Al-Risala, Kitab al-Umm	Musnad Ahmad
Method	Reasoning, analogy (qiyas), opinion (ra'y)	Practice of Medina, hadith	Balanced hadith and reasoning (fiqh)	Strict hadith reliance, literalism
Legacy	Hanafi sect (maslak) – South Asia, Turkey, Central Asia	Maliki sect (maslak) – North & West Africa	Shafi'i sect (maslak) – East Africa & Southeast Asia	Hanbali sect (maslak) – Arabia, later Wahhabi influence